

## Interculturalism in philosophy:

### A contemporary Mexican non-linear configuration of its study

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Philosophy as an activity can be hard to describe concerning the subjects that includes, the topics and its function in society. However, we will try to address the question on the relevance of the premodern traditions in Mexico's current philosophical thought. To try and answer this question I will first review the philosophical thought in Mexico's indigenous cultures, in trying to review how the historical sources point to a strong philosophical thought. But also, briefly we will revisit the medieval tradition in the New Spain, and the peculiar steps of independent Mexico into modernity. In a second moment, I will argue for an epistemological pluralism that will set itself against a single philosophical perspective, into what is philosophy and its goals. Hence, I will be able to move on how even today there are important contributions to philosophy from a perspective that recovers the rich history, forms of life and politics of Mexico's original cultures.

In Mexico there are 11 linguistic families, which make around 68 linguistic groups that make up more than 100 languages. Speakers of an indigenous language are around 6.2% of Mexico's population. However there are States where they represent more than double of this figure out of the population. These communities are the heirs to the great cultural traditions which are continuous all the way to prehispanic times. One of the larger groups is the nahuas, out of which the Mexicas are one of the most well know, it is so that they lend their name to the country. But in the great and vast empire that Cortés and the Spanish encountered in 1519, there were clear signs and plenty of sources to their philosophical conceptions.

Many of these sources were collected by the great nahua philologist Miguel León Portilla (2006), who renders a complete outlook into Nahuatl philosophy, where metaphysical reflections on the dual principle of universe, time and deities is found. Of course, theological thought is also a considerable part of this philosophy, where knowledge of life and death is a recurring theme. However, human beings as such are also an important part of Nahua philosophy, problems such as free will, and the ethical problems that derive from it were present and had ramifications into politics and law. It is also worthy of mention how close were epistemological reflections to art, where truth is a complicated matter to obtain. However, it shows itself from time to time in flowers and songs (León-Portilla, 2006). The formation of a person, their education was also a matter that was found in the ancient sources. What were the principles on which a person should be raised to follow and how to decide on what to do was also a theme much discussed. And there is constant reference to the wisemen, who would reflect on such matters and teach them to others, in the Nahua tradition they were called the

Tlamatimine. Hence at least in the case of the Nahuas it is relatively easy to find elements of a complete philosophical conception of reality and humans' place in it.

The sources on which we can rely to study this philosophy are in the prehispanic Codices and also the ones that were commissioned by the Spanish friars such as Bernardino de Sahagún, to the old Nahuas with whom they came in contact in the XVI century. But not all the friars were so preoccupied with keeping the culture alive and recording their art, philosophy and history. In the case of the Mayas in México's Southeast Fray Diego de Landa, instructed the destruction of all Codices that they could get their hands on. The great symbolism of the serpent in Mesoamerican cultures was equated by the Christian friars to worship of the devil and was considered heretic. And through such a destruction, the Mayan communities lost their reading and writing for centuries. And a great deal of their wisdom had to be kept in oral tradition, but anyway the loss must have been enormous.

During World War II, Knórozov a Russian linguist, enlisted as a soldier, brought back from Berlin two books, A roster of the things of Yucatán by Diego de Landa and several Mayan codices. With these books at hand and his prior knowledge of Hindu and Chinese, he broke the code of Mayan writing. It was a great finding that would allow, after 5 centuries to read the remaining codices, books, but also the glyphs in the ancient cities and buildings. Hence ancient sources of Mayan philosophy are not complete, but still in an oral fashion many of their cultural and philosophical conceptions are preserved to this day. Likewise, many of the peoples of the north of Mexico, who ruled over great extensions of land, and often did not have a written language, but their culture and conceptions have been also preserved in oral tradition.

In considering, colonial philosophy in Mexico, from the XVI-XVIII centuries it can also be considered somehow a premodern philosophy. The great influence that the church had in the life of the New Spain, and its institutions, a still scholastic philosophy was taught at the universities and seminars of the main cities of México. We should point out two of the most important universities that were created in that period and still exist to this day: The Royal University of Mexico (founded in 1553), is in some ways continuous with UNAM (The National Autonomous University of Mexico) and in 1540 The College of Saint Nicolás Bishop was founded, which is also continuous with the Michoacán's University of Saint Nicolás. Both institutions had important philosophy schools in which scholastic philosophy was taught, but also towards the XVIII Century we find interesting discussions by philosophers such as Mariano Coriche with the ongoing modern epistemological conceptions of philosophers such as Rousseau. Likewise, Juan Benito Díaz de Gamarra studied the logical and rhetorical considerations of Pascal and Descartes' work (Beuchot, 1996). Francisco Javier Clavijero in his 'Ancient History of Mexico', deals with some of the philosophical problems of the people of America, on their specificity and commonalities to the rest of the human gender (Villoro 2014). It is worth mentioning that México's independence revolution in the XIX century are often considered to be inspired by the French Enlightenment and its philosophers. However, this would not be accurate

since the beginning of the Mexican Independence demanded the reinstatement of Fernando VIII and revoking the liberal constitution of Cadiz (Villoro 1977). It was only until latter in this century that liberal political ideas became relevant and configured Juárez and posterior governments.

It was until the XX century, where in accordance with nationalistic governments in México an also nationalistic inspired philosophy was set out to find a way in which philosophy could be made from the specific Latin-American circumstance. Philosophers such as José Vasconcelos, Antonio Caso and Samuel Ramos were among the first to set out in this quest. Nobel Prize winner and México's ambassador to Japan, Octavio Paz can also be considered as part of this movement, which allowed us to see how a specific circumstance and intellectual as well as political tradition gave rise to some interesting philosophical problems to reflect upon.

#### On a philosophical tradition in Mexico

In this section I will try to argue that the strong philosophical underpinning of prehispanic philosophy, as well as the specific social and intellectual tradition that was developed in the American continent can be thought as a philosophical tradition that has vastly changed over the years, but is fruitful in its dialogue with contemporary philosophical enterprises, as well as with other philosophical traditions in the world.

I will try to frame this discussion on two related subjects, one epistemological on the possibility of different conceptual schemes and the other, sociological on the specific functions of philosophy in different societies. If it is possible that different languages create different conceptual schemes, that have different beliefs, rules of inference, methodological norms, considered in them (Olivé 1999). For example, in a language such as Yucatan's Mayan, it would be rather difficult to express a concept such as truth in an epistemological sense. Furthermore, the Tojolabal (one of the Mayan languages) would have a hard time expressing concepts such as "my hand", since everyone has one of these, the basic form of expressing this would be "our hand" (Lenkersdorf 2005). Think of the implications that this language structure has for action and political thought, which from this conceptual scheme leads to a communitarian structure of ethics and politics.

And, if different philosophical ideas are possible and rational from different conceptual and linguistic schemes this allows for different traditions to have important and relevant contributions to philosophy. However, this could be viewed as a relativist stance in philosophy, I wish to take a step away from such direction, because not every belief is relevant inside a conceptual and cultural scheme. There would be norms and rules to the acceptance of those beliefs that are considered legitimate in a scheme. Furthermore, a scheme should be ready to revise any belief and its corollary consequences, if it comes in conflict with new beliefs and turns out to be of high relevance to a community. Each community needs to have rules to pick between these conflicting beliefs. Hence, not proposing a relativism, since not all beliefs can be considered valid, and they can be revised (Olivé 1999).

Moreover, values and beliefs can be revised also in view of conflict with other cultural and conceptual schemes. Even if there are topic incommensurabilities between two conceptual schemes, their values or rules, these are not absolute nor prevailing. There is room for dialogue and agreement on those subjects where from different perspectives could conflict.

Getting into a conceptual scheme is the regular work of the translator for example; but philosophers can also approach concepts from other philosophical traditions and get around these incommensurabilities, by way of getting to know the complete conceptual scheme. Much in a way of how we translate or learn a language, it is possible to discuss with other traditions, and in this sense an intercultural philosophy, would be one where not one tradition prevails over the others. Instead a dialogical way of doing philosophy that allows for different problems, preoccupations and valuations of the tasks of philosophy to take part.

That is to say that there is not one single philosophical pathway, that the European modernity, its subject and project would not by any chance be monolithic. On the contrary the European tradition has had a non-linear development into what we may call contemporary philosophy. The modern subject has gone through different conceptions, rationalists, empiricists, for example, in contrast with the Hegelian and Romantic reaction. These two perspectives into the modern subject have different points of view but share in large some of the interests in the research and the understanding of the philosophical problem. So, there is not a problem in principle to accept that further away traditions may take other stances in this problem.

In fact, it is also true that the task of philosophers (or sages) in a society is different and their interests may also differ sometimes with strictly academic projects of philosophy. But this should not be a challenge to the status of philosophical knowledge.

#### Applied philosophy from cultural interchange

Science and philosophy in recent years have been rethinking their role in society. The conception of the scientist up on a glass tower, away from the community which sustains his or her activities is changing more and more. And the same can also be true for the philosophical community, that even when dealing with highly abstract topics it is not necessary that they remain removed from the society in which they live and dwell. It is also evermore often that the research projects in many topics must be multidisciplinary gathering the points of view of many experts on different subjects.

Challenges such as global warming are not going to be solved with the involvement of only chemists, there have to be also participants from other areas of thought such as sociologists to find how different solutions would play out in the different communities. In these tasks, philosophers have also been called to participate to come up with ethical principles and to analyze the moral dilemmas that arise when facing such challenges.

But also, the layperson and stake holders are called to participate in these interdisciplinary solutions,

since they are the ones that will suffer the changes in policies and their consequences, so their point of view is vital in this sense. And such way of working can be considered natural in democratic societies that use knowledge to solve their problems, coined also as knowledge societies.

It is in this setting, that I would like to frame the participation of the philosopher in a democratic society that would allow for different forms of life and cultures to live and develop in a harmonious fashion. In this case, the subject of study can be considered one of clinical ethics, where attention to the indigenous people was found to be discriminatory. The public health services in Mexico don't have the capacity to offer care in a way that is respectful of the forms of life of many of the indigenous peoples. It is in the law that a person has the right to receive health services in his mother tongue, as it is vital to the clear communication between patient and doctor, but except for a few intercultural hospitals dispersed all along Mexico this is not the case.

We set out to do research on the palliative care offered to the Zapotec people in Southeastern state of Oaxaca, specifically in the Central Valleys. To this day, the Zapotec are one of the most important indigenous groups of Mexico. Their classical period was 600-800 of our era, and had a notable culture in prehispanic times, well known is the city of Monte Alban that ruled over the Valley. But as a living and dynamic people, there is a great need of study the traditional medicine in these specific communities, since the health-illness process is quite different and in the community traditional medics are often considered wisemen and women and the holders of knowledge on the person and their health. Hence traditional doctors are one of the principal sources of this research and their point of view was relevant. And in this case, we find that this is to an extent philosophical knowledge that is valuable to get to know and dialogue with academic philosophy.

The conceptions of life and death are drastically different from the non-indigenous population, many of the fiestas that you may have heard from Mexico's day of the death, celebrated on November 2nd, are fiestas and rituals from the Zapotec. At first, we inquired on how these conceptions could be respected when they sought medical help in the hospitals of the Oaxaca's capital city. For example, often when a person died the family, would take down the body from the bed on to the floor, for him or her, to gather soil. We come from that earth and when we die, we need to be in contact with it. This practice was harshly reprehended by the hospital personnel. Being sure that some accommodations may be done to respect and honor a deceased person, and his or her form of life and death. Furthermore, the rituals of a person's death and mourning are long and complex according to the Zapotec traditions. All the community participates in the funeral, they all make donations called tequio, to help the family who will host 9 days of mourning and prayer.

But such a study was not only on how to improve state provided medical services, but it is an important point of discussion on clinical ethics on a whole. Our very large medical system, clinical ethics has somehow followed the lead of important American Universities, when teaching medical students. Principlism of Beauchamp & Childress (2009), which holds autonomy, justice, beneficence

and non-harm as the principles to be held. In the case of Zapotec communities and their doctors, autonomy as a liberal principle is not a principle that can be considered mainly in the treatment, giving a more communitarian sense to the decision to be made, being the family central in the decision making (De Hoyos 2015).

The humanization of the clinical practice, the accompaniment of the patient and in the case of the palliative care, their spiritual comforting of the patient are practices that can nurture our conceptions on this ethical relationship and a preparation for death that is not given only at the moment of severe illness but throughout life, by making children participate in the remembrance of the death and its perennial presence in life. All of these are solid contributions that the Zapotec and their culture have to offer to the discussion and development of a field such as clinical ethics.

To end my participation, I would like to briefly offer another example of contributions of the indigenous people have made that can even transcend the philosophical stage of Latin America. The example comes from Luis Villoro, who was very interested in the political thought of the Zapatista movement, an insurgent military uprising in 1994 that was mostly integrated by indigenous Mayan peasants of Chiapas. The resistance and counterpower that Zapatistas posed to the Mexican government was a political movement unlike others, they proposed a fight not to take power, only to oppose it by standing there and seek justice. Villoro argues that even if there is no universal applicable definition of Justice, different political traditions that would have a hard time concurring on what is fair; the dialogue between cultures can open a way for others to recognize the injustice that others are suffering from injustice and help them to oppose it (Villoro 2007).

This kind of reflection would enable a project of intercultural philosophy that feeds from different traditions within Mexico but allows them easily to dialogue with the rest of Latin America, and further away with other intellectual traditions that would be interested to open dialogue.

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